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BIRD GUARDIANS

A Masque
for Bird Protection
by
Leigh Mitchell Hodges
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"BIRD GUARDIANS" was written for the Doylestown Nature Club and by it first produced August 21, 1915. Its purpose is to awaken interest in the vital matter of bird-protection, and its presentation by schools or clubs may be arranged by addressing the author, without whose written consent no production hereof is permitted.

Doylestown, Penna.,
March, 1916.

THE CAST

Speaking Parts—

Master of the Scenes
Bluebird
Robin
Wood Thrush
Song Sparrow
Kingbird
Red-winged Blackbird
Catbird
Owl

Chorus—

Cuckoo
Meadowlark
Scarlet Tanager
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Baltimore Oriole
Mocking Bird
Barn Swallow
Purple Martin
Bluejay
Dove
"Bob White"
Red-headed Woodpecker
Black-and-white Warbler
Gold-finch
Chickadee
Hummingbird

NOTE: The masque should be staged in the open under trees, and for accompanying the chorus there should be a harp and violin, or any combination of strings desired, though the singing may be unaccompanied. The Master of the Scenes enters alone.

PROLOGUE—*to be spoken by the Master of Scenes garbed in gray and bearing a living staff, green-leaved.*

HERE, where the trees like silent sentinels
Stand guard o'er Nature's varied benefits—
Each clothed in beauty and endowed to use—
Here, on a carpet many times more rare
Than rarest fruit of Persia's patient looms,
And underneath the ceiling of all light,
With nought between us and the Source of Power
Except the veil of thoughts we interpose—
Or draw aside when contemplating Nature—
We come to bring a message from the birds
Those little friends who bear to us a blessing
Which this brief hour shall seek to make more clear.

CHORUS (*All the birds joining the Master in a group and singing, to the tune of Rubinstein's "Melody in F."*)

Welcome, O wingless, who wait to be told
How we have guarded thy homes from of old;
How we have sought in field, garden and tree
Ever to make thee more free.
Here we will show thee the love that we carry,
Here we will tell of the service we give
Here we will tell how we help you to live
Here voice our interest in thee.
Welcome, O wingless, and when we have told
How we have guarded thy homes from of old,
Go forth to guard us from those who are blind
Lead them to hearts that are kind.

BLUEBIRD (*stepping forward as the other birds disappear among the trees and addressing the audience.*)

With flash of bright blue wing
I come to say "'Tis Spring!"
In orchard-tree or friendly nook
My eggs like scraps of noon-sky look
And all day long
My warbling song
Is like a silver-purling brook
That splashes crystal stones.
The while I sing I rid the farm
Of bugs and worms that do much harm,
Indeed, if I and Robin dear

Should fail to come, your crops, I fear
By hoppers green and beetles strong
Would be devoured ere many a year.

(Turning to ROBIN, who meantime has crept up to BLUEBIRD'S side;)

I did not know you were so near!

ROBIN *(smiles and makes a neat salute.)*

Sweet sister, draped in heaven's own blue,
Within my red breast beats for you
A heart that has no fear of man
So trustful am I of the plan
Which set us feathered creatures down
In field and countryside and town.
And yet but yesterday my joy
Was darkened by a thoughtless boy
Who aimed a stone at my good mate
And bruised him as he, singing, sate
Upon a bough. I wondered then
How he would feel if giant men
Should wait to strike down one he loved!
If only human hearts were moved
To be more kind!

If only we
Might find safe haven in each tree!
I think men owe it us—but hush!—
I hear the flute-tones of Wood Thrush!

(Both turn to the right, whence sounds a flute note and WOOD THRUSH comes slowly toward them, looking around as if frightened.)

WOOD THRUSH:

As I came through the wooded swamp
A gruff old voice I heard.
I think it was a cruel man
A-swearing at a bird.
I did not wait, for all alone
Of small help could I be,
But now I find you waiting here,
Come, be of help with me!

(The three go off together to the left, while SONG SPARROW limps in, and says as if in pain:)

SONG SPARROW:

I wonder why he did not like my song!
I sang my sweetest, yet he looked so black!
And just before the final trill I felt
A stinging in my wing and heard a crack

*(sinks to the ground and is surrounded by BLUEBIRD, ROBIN and
WOOD THRUSH, who come hurrying in from left).*

BLUEBIRD:

O, Sparrow, what has happened
To bring you thus laid low?

SPARROW:

Unless it was the song I sang,
Sweet friends, I do not know.

ROBIN:

But who could still a song like yours,
Or take you for a foe!

SPARROW:

Sweet friends, you must remember
Few men take time to know
How I devour the seeds of weeds
And let their gardens grow
Unchoked by deadly enemies,
And yet, you know, 'tis so!

WOOD THRUSH:

We know, we know, and how we yearn
For men thy benefits to learn.

*(They lift SPARROW and help her off the scene, and while this is
going on SCARLET TANAGER sings from a hidden nook
any bird-song that may be selected from the long list of such,
obtainable at any music store).*

MASTER OF SCENES: *(walking to front of stage at close of song.)*

My friends, last year alone, in this fair land
The kindred of the sparrow you have seen
Wounded by thoughtless man, protected us
Against a loss from weeds which would have been
A hundred million dollars, so you see
It pays to shield the singers in each tree!

KINGBIRD: (*advancing boldly toward Master and bowing low:*)

You speak of sparrow's appetite
And all the good she brings,
Pray, let me tell of benefits
From other friends with wings.
In Massachusetts—just one state—
Twenty-five million birds
For five months every day do feast
Upon the insect herds.
If they but eat a hundred each
From dawn to set of sun
Two million and a half are felled
Before the day is done.
Six score of thousands insects fill
A bushel basket, so
Full twenty thousand bushels are
Devoured each day! You know
What devastation would result
If these were left to grow!

MASTER:

Indeed, I know, but sad to say
Most people see it not that way.
A robin steals a cherry, and
He's rudely driven from the land
Which, but for him and kindred birds
Would soon be prey to insect herds!
But here comes red-winged blackbird, see,
How glaringly he looks at me!

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD: (*enters swaggering and in a loud voice says:*)

In days of old
When knights were bold
Was none more bold than I,
I spurned the ease
Of shady trees
And swept the sunny sky!
On dragon-flies
And winged spies
Of every hue I fed,
And beetles bright
And wasps so light
Before me vainly sped!

And then when fields
Were rich with yields
Of sweet and luscious oats
I filled my craw
And packed my maw.
And mocked the farmers' throats!
And yet with all my thefts, Kingbird
I save them much, upon my word!

CATBIRD: (*calling "meow" as she enters*)
You save far more than those sly cats
Who feast on birds instead of rats
And indoors should be forced to stay
At least three months from first of May.
I tell you, Black, it isn't thrifty
To let a feline eat up fifty
Protecting birds before they're grown,
Yet that's the record, as is known.

BLACKBIRD:
If I were you I wouldn't sing
So much like such a wicked thing.

CATBIRD:
I do it, Black, to show them how
Cats could behave, 'spite the meow!

BLACKBIRD:
You needn't talk, they say you steal
Full many a farmer's fruity meal.
But why should we remain to scowl
When here comes dignified old Owl!

(*The OWL walks in sedately and Black and Cat slink away, looking back over their shoulders and gliding into the bushes where they stoop to listen.*)

OWL:
When great Minerva counselled me
"Be always wise and just" said she,
And wise and just I try to be.
But for my life, I cannot see
Why men men should not be just and wise
To visitors who, from the skies
Descend to rid them of the band
Of desecrators of the land.

BLACK AND CAT. (*from behind bush*)

O how you howl
At midnight Owl!

OWL, (*gruffly*)

Begone you highway robbers bold,
You're thieves of grain and fruit, I'm told,
And now a useful bird you scold!
Men know my worth surpasses price
I mainly feast on rats and mice
And thus I save the world a slice
Of damage that would costly be.
They may hate you, but they like me.

BLACK:

They may hate us, but all the same
We don't deserve our mooted name,
For insects many we devour
And thus prevent them holding power

*(with this, Black and Cat withdraw, leaving by left and BLUEBIRD,
ROBIN, WOOD THRUSH and SONG SPARROW come
in together, gaily)*

BLUEBIRD:

How fine it is to meet a man
Who treats us as his friends,
And gently binds our little hurts
And our bruised feathers mends!

ROBIN:

Someday I think all men will feel
That we are friends, and try
To make amends for thoughtlessness
In times that have passed by.

THRUSH:

Someday the state will recognize
Our worth, and legislate
Against all those do us harm,
All those who bear us hate.

SPARROW:

In this celestial scheme of things
We're guardians of the air
At work from earliest peep of dawn,
And busy everywhere.

MASTER: (*approaching from left, with wand in hand*)

Come, guardians, come,
Day folds her wings,
And night her peace
And stillness brings.

CHORUS OF BIRDS,—(*forming a circle and doing a slow dance as they sing to the tune of Rubinstein's Melody in F.*)

Farewell, sweet friends, who have heard our brief plea,
Farewell and may peace attend upon thee,
Go forth to guard us from those who are blind,
Lead them to hearts that are kind.
Whene'er you see us remember our service;
Do not forget we are working for you.
Treat us as neighbors and nothing shall swerve us
Always to be guardians true.
Farewell, sweet friends, who have heard our brief plea,
Farewell, and may peace attend upon thee,
Go forth to guard us from those who are blind,
Lead them to hearts that are kind.

Note: Any dance movement or song or music desired may be added to this Masque.

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